DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 343 120 CS 213 187

AUTHOR Smith, Maggy
TITLE Reconsidering the Effects of Context on Writing: Some Social Implications for Writing.
PUB DATE Mar 91
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (42nd, Boston, MA, March 21-23, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Response; *College Freshmen; Discourse Analysis; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Interviews; *Writing Attitudes; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS *Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

A study examined college freshmen management students' views about the social implications for their writing in terms of themselves as writers, the way they view their audience and their audience's reaction to their writing, and about the actual text itself. Seven self-selected students in the management class were interviewed after each of three assignments given during the course of the semester. Data were also collected by participant observation of the class and surveys, and classroom discourse analysis was examined using a schema for analyzing interactions developed by R. F. Bales. Results indicated that: (1) generally, students expressed opinions that indicated that their writing had social implications for them personally and for the others in the group; (2) over the course of the semester, the percentage of writer-based responses increased as a reason given for deleting from or elaborating upon their texts; (3) students' references to their audience decreased over time; (4) the percentage of text-based responses increased, suggesting that students became more concerned about their texts as the semester progressed; and (5) over the course of the semester, the students referred to elements of the writing context more with each interview. Findings suggest that students' writing does influence the context for which it was constructed and produced, including the students' own social roles as integral parts of that context. (Twenty-one references are attached.) (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED343120

RECONSIDERING THE EFFECTS OF CONTEXT ON WRITING: SOME SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR WRITING

Paper presented at the 1991 CCCC, Boston, MA

Maggy Smith
Department of English
University of Texas--El Paso
El Paso, TX 79968-0526
(915) 747-5731

Who among us is not a witness to the social implications for writing? Intuitively, we all know writing has large and small scale social implications. In fact, in the 1990 Chair's address to *CCCC*, Jane Peterson talked about our own professional attitudes towards prestige. In order to have prestige, she indicated, we, i.e., college professors, must write and publish. The implications of this for us as college professors are such things as money, rank, promotions, visiting professorships, research grants, book contracts, invitations to speak, and so on.

It is in this vein that I want to put the issue of "social context" on trial (to borrow from our convention theme). As my title suggests, I want to reconsider "the effects of context on writing" by looking at "the social implications for writing." This very phrase implies that writing influences the writer's social setting, or context, yet it seems to me that context has had a difficult time becoming interactive. Context has been one-way, always asking "what is *context*?" and "how does *context* influence students' writing?"

I'd like to reconsider "context and writing," looking at this concept as a system that is **interactive**. In fact, according to Marilyn Cooper, writing is very much, an ecological system.

CS213187

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Smith
BEST COPY AVAILABLE
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

RECONSIDERATION

"Writing," says Cooper in "The Ecology of Writing," "is one of the activities by which we locate ourselves in the enmeshed systems that make up the social world. It is not simply a way of thinking but more fundamentally a way of acting" (13). It is, she goes on to say, elaborating on Wilhelm von Humboldt, "an activity through which we become most truly human" (13).

Cooper suggests that writing is the activity that makes us truly human; i.e., writing changes our positions in relation to our social worlds almost constantly, creating for us and our students interactive environments where the written language serves the roles that Fulwiler and Young in *Language Connections: Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum* identify: through writing we learn, we communicate, and we form values. Furthermore, as Tinberg states in a recent *CCC* article, we must "view the 'text' of our classrooms as dialogical and allegorical. . . . Nothing that occurs in the classroom is without significance" (40). Then, by extension, writing has important social implications.

Last, in that same February 1991 issue of *CCC*, Hawisher and Selfe remind us that "our view of teaching and of how students learn invariably shapes our behavior in the classroom. The metaphors we build to house our professional knowledge exerts a powerful influence over us" (64). Though Hawisher and Selfe are writing about using computers in writing classes, their point is a universal one. This metaphor for many of us is a dynamic one, one that puts us on equal footing with our students as we are each teachers and learners in the writing class that promotes active learning.

TRIALS

Looking back for a minute at that which is on trial, the unidirectional view of context and writing . . .. An abundance of composition research over the last decade has addressed issues tangential to the notion that writing has "social implications": Composition research has asked "what elements of the student's social context influence his/her writing." Researchers such as Bazerman, Zappen, Myers, Odell, Langer, Herrington, Dyson, Applebee, McCarthy, and many others have answered: audience influences writers' texts; the writing task influences writers' texts; the writers' community or social context influences the writers' texts. And so on.

Furthermore, we have also begun to ask, "What influence does writing have on its environment?" Researchers such as Doheny-Farina; Langer and Applebee; Paradis, Dobrin, and Miller; and Smith; among others have begun to answer this question: writing serves important functions to organize and shape the workplace; writing changes people's behaviors in class and the workplace; writing influences students' discussions in the classroom.

REORIENTATION

The number of angles from which to reorient our view of writing, writers, and the text is almost limitless. The research cited above, then, leads us directly to ask questions like the following: What are the social implications for the writing that our students do? Now that writers no longer need write in a vacuum--a single writer to a single reader, and now that many of our classes are collaborative in nature, just what occurs in our classes when students write? Do we as teachers have control over the direction of that occurrence?

In fact, do we not actually create the context in which our students write? This, "the fin de siecle," to borrow from the conference's theme, of this strand of composition research, reorients what has gone before, integrates it, and points to a future where composition could be viewed as the system that Cooper maintains it should be.

While the composition research alone provides enough dissonance for plentiful and rich research questions, the composition research paired with educational concerns that students have become passive learners, not engaged actively with their learning, suggests that we examine students' discourse (or interactions) as they are communicating in their classrooms. Since Amidron and Flanders published *The Role of the Teacher in the Classroom: A Manual for Understanding and Improving Teacher Classroom Behavior* in 1971, with the exception of Courtney Cazden's book, *Classroom Discourse*, little has been written about the nature of discourse in the writing classroom. For example, does written work bring about changes in students' classroom communicative behavior and what are the social implications of that changed behavior.

While all of the work mentioned above has had a valuable impact on our teaching of writing, these studies have not addressed the social implications that writing has for our freshman composition students or for students in other writing intensive classes across the disciplines. While students' writing, like our own, takes many shapes and has far-reaching implications, in this paper, I am going to talk about writing in one freshman management class, specifically the ways in which students report that their writing changed how they thought about themselves as writers, the ways students viewed their audiences and their

audiences' reactions to them, and the ways in which these students viewed the actual text itself.

METHODS

In summary, this study was essentially a naturalistic study of freshmen writing for a management class, employing a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods: closed- and open-ended surveys, participant observation of the class, field notes from and audio recordings of the class sessions, discourse-based interviews and open-ended interviews with the professor and several key informants that self-selected, and a classroom discourse analysis scheme that I adapted from a scheme for analyzing interactions (*Interaction Process Analysis*) that was developed by Harvard sociologist Robert F. Bales. I do not intend to elaborate any more extensively on the methods of this research; they are available in Smith, 1988, for anyone who wants to review them.

The research sought to understand what the social implications for writing were in this single freshman management class. Specifically, the research sought to answer the following question:

> **what were the freshman management students' views about the social implications for their writing in regards to the following elements of the social setting: (1) about themselves as writers; (2) about their readers and the reader's responses to them; (3) about the text they constructed and produced; and (4) about the writing context?**

RESULTS

The answer to this question is two-pronged: generally speaking, writing has a significant effect on its context; specifically, the social implications for writing are tacit ones that the students come to recognize as influential in their writing and, subsequently, in their classroom lives.

Students Express Authority

Generally, in talking about their writing and in their classroom interactions after they wrote, students expressed opinions that indicated that their writing had social implications for them personally and for the others in the group.

You can imagine the kinds of implications that writing had for students in this class when they interact with one another as they do in the following snippet from the class session on a day when they had writing due for class. The students were debating which of several companies should get their business, something they had written about for class.

> **M/Stu**[1]: That was 20% that the company had developed. They said they wouldn't put more that 20% of their business in any one company. So, you do the numbers with Refco [one of the companies the students are evaluating] and it comes out that with their progress payments of 80% of raw materials, manufacturing, only 2 of those products from 1978 total $394,000 so when you add that to the 2 million they already bought it comes out to 19.5% of their estimated gross sales.
>
> **M/Stu**: Then, with the contribution that they . . . [is interrupted]

[1]In the text of the class transcript the notation "M/Stu" indicates a male student speaking, while an "F/Stu" notation indicates a female student speaking.

F/Stu: . . . end up dropping them anyway.

M/Stu: There's been a rumor for 4 years. At that time they took too much time.

F/Stu: They haven't been delivering. They just started getting back, after 4 years, then all of a sudden, they . . . [interrupted]

F/Stu: You're thinking. . . a very important turning point. You sit there and you say "hey, Refco is really gonna' break down, take Kathco, and so Kathco is a one shot deal. Now, if you lose Refco's project and you lose Kathco's project, and now . . . Refco, maybe they'll come back, but Kathco's gonna' be gone and you don't have the time for long term . . . [interrupted]

M/Stu: Yeah. You're right. But the point is that in 4 or 5 months, you can take $9,000 from Kathco, if you need money in the company.

Whole group responds: Oh-h-h-h-

F/Stu: [completes the idea begun by M above] you're trying to develop new customers.

In this snippet of class discussion, unlike most traditional class sessions, the students are controlling the class discussion. They are asking one another questions and answering them with authority. They are interrupting one another; occasionally the whole class expresses agreement, as in the "Oh-h-h-"; yet, occasionally the whole class expresses disagreement, too. At any rate, they do not defer to the teacher, nor do they solicit her input or approval. They have come to class having completed a writing assignment and, as Langer and Applebee say, "the writing has shaped the students' thinking as they consolidated new information and extended their knowledge." As a result, they speak from positions of authority, and are regarded as authorities by one another, their positions never being questioned only challenged by a differing point of view, another position of competing

authority. This confident expression of fact and opinion is the result of their writing.

Social Factors Impinge on Writing and Context

More **specifically**, when these students talked about their writing themselves, they were tacitly aware of the social implications for the writing they were doing. In other words, in talking about their writing, the students talked about the implications their writing would have in several ways: implications for themselves as writers, for their readers as responders, for their text as it had been constructed and produced, and for the classroom context for which they wrote.

In summary, to determine what kinds of tacit information the students brought to the writing task, I conducted discourse-based interviews with 7 students (who self selected) concerning the three formal writing assignments that they had completed over the course of the semester. Following the interviews, I transcribed and coded the interviews based on an inductive scheme for coding students' interview responses. Interestingly, the comments that the students made about their writing changed over the course of these three interviews.

Students' perceptions of themselves, their audiences, their texts and their classroom contexts not only impinged on the writing that they composed but also had social implications for them as well; thus, the writing influenced their social worlds--the context for which they wrote, in other words. Interestingly, these findings are not unlike the elements of context that composition researchers have suggested influence students' own writing.

IMPLICATIONS OF BEING WRITERS (writer-based reasons)

In talking about their writing, the students' expressed particular views of themselves as writers. Students' comments referred either to (1) the points they were making in the paper, or (2) the strategies they were using when writing the paper. These views changed in a number of ways over the three writing assignments. For example, often students referred to a particular point as being central to the argument in the paper. They did this by making statements such as the following:

> I felt that that was important when I made my decision to keep that company (Paddy, #1).
>
> Let's say that [this] is really a major indication of why the company is having as many problems as it is. And that's really what I'm trying to prove in the paper (Mike, #1).
>
> I wanted to explain why the titanium market has been growing in recent years (Polly, #2).
>
> No, because if I don't point out that they're wrong it defeats the whole purpose of having the rest (Janey, #3).
>
> So that is why I put that in there, to say well his first reaction is very important and this is what he thought (Steve, #3).

By defending these key points that the students used in composing their own writing, they imply that they knew as writers what they were doing, in other words, they were making conscious decisions and believed that they held evidence that supported those decisions. In addition to emphasizing key points, the writers also referred to strategies that they had used for writing. In these instances, the writers talked about ways to compose a piece of writing. Occasionally, the writers used a generic "you" to suggest what any writer

should do when s/he is writing. Also, when they spoke about strategies for completing the writing task, they often talked about why they did what they did. For example, they made responses such as the following:

> That's the way I was taught to write (Bill, #1).
>
> I was always taught [that] in English you start with one sentence and then you conclude it (Janey, #1).
>
> What I tried to do was I tried to draw attention to it by putting it there at the end of the paragraph (Mike #2).
>
> Because when you write these things, like you do it on the word processor, and you put stuff in, and if you don't like it, you take it out. So anything that's there, it's important to be there (Steve, #3).
>
> It's like part of good English; you're supposed to say exactly what you are dealing with, and go right into it, and not leave it sort of vague. So I wouldn't [delete it] (Janey, #3).

Over the course of the semester, the students' evidence about these issues of writing and themselves as writers changed in an important way. Over the course of the 3 interviews, the percentage of **writer-based** responses increased from approximately 63% to 73% to 75% as a reason that students gave for deleting from or elaborating upon their texts.

These comments indicate that as a group the students became more concerned, over the course of the semester, with the points they made and with the writing strategies they used to make those points, and, ultimately, with the consequences those points had for them socially--with increasing confidence that their ideas about "how to compose" should be taken seriously.

In addition, the students indicated that their writing had implications for the readers and for the readers' reactions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEIR READERS (reader-based)

In discussing their writing, the students views of their readers changed in unexpected ways over the course of the semester. When talking about their texts, the students made several kinds of references to their readers.

First, the students made references to a general reader. In doing this they talked about someone who would read the report, but not someone by name. They made references such as the following:

> You have to be able to show the person who is reading that you . . . [know how to write] (Steve, #2).
>
> I'm assuming that whoever is reading the paper is going to want to know about my thought process (Mike, #2).

In addition to referring to general readers, when the students were talking about their papers, they made references to specific readers. These specific readers were the Professor, the TA, their classmates, or some person who had been stipulated in the case. For example, they made comments such as the following:

> We're writing for Dr. Lynch, for the TA, for someone who knows basically what the paper is about (Janey, #1).
>
> Supposedly, in class, everybody is supposed to know what that is (Kim, #1).
>
> Basically, I would leave that because who this is structured towards is McMaster who's, you know, [in] production or sales (Bill, #2).

In these two types of references to their readers, the writers are conscious of at least three possible social roles: their imaginary roles that each assignment asked them to inhabit, their roles as students writing for the teacher-as-examiner, and their more generic roles as students searching for someone to hear their points of view. By characterizing their audiences, the students identify ways that their writing has implications for the reader and conversely that the audience has implications for their writing. For example, the students assume that readers know certain things and that to maintain their own status in the social setting, they too, must demonstrate that same knowledge. Otherwise, they may not be taken seriously. In analyzing their audiences, students use whatever tools they have tacitly incorporated into their repertoire of writing skills.

Collectively, these three types of reader-based responses varied considerably over the semester and across tasks. The students' references to their audience over the three interviews decreased each time, dropping from 33% with the first to 23% with the second and to 13% with the third. This seems to be an indication that having written for this audience once, made it easier the second and third times, so they had to overtly consider their audience less and less. They came to know and understand what the social implications of their writing were for this audience.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE TEXTS PRODUCED (text-based)

When students were talking about their writing, besides talking about themselves and their audiences, they also referred to the text itself as an element of their writing having

implications for them. In doing this, students discussed the way in which a particular passage functioned in relation to other parts of their texts and why it was essential or not. The following samples illustrate this category of response:

> And it ties the whole paragraph together (Janey, #1).
>
> That's just kind of like a conclusion for everything that I have in the paragraph, so I think that would be a reason to keep it in (Mike, #3).
>
> Well, that sentence is sort of a justification (Steve, #3).
>
> It explains how I made my decision; it's like a brief summary of how I made my decision (Paddy, #2).
>
> It's telling why he would feel a sense of accomplishment (Kim, #3).

As in the previous two categories (writer and reader), student references to their texts demonstrate the importance that their manipulation of the text had for them. The text-based category also shifts over the course of the semester and over writing tasks. With the first interviews, 55% of the choices are text-based responses, while only 44% are with the second and 70% with the third.

The percentage of text-based responses drops with the second interview and increases again between the second and third interviews. They also increase overall, suggesting that students became more concerned about their texts as the semester progressed. The students had come to grips with the demands of both being writers who were defending their own principles of writing and being writers who were writing for expert readers that they wanted to impress or surpass. Having some knowledge of their social status in the classroom gave

them freedom to focus more specifically on text-based issues and decisions.

IMPLICATIONS OF THEIR CONTEXT (context-based reasons)

In addition to writer-based, audience-based, and text-based implications, students also identified context-based implications for elaborating or deleting passages from their texts. The context-based reasons were of several types, including references to the class (specifically to what people did, what they said, or to another assignment). In making these references, the students referred to things that the Professor said and did, to something a class member (including him/herself) said or did, and to an assignment that had been completed previously. For example, they made comments such as the following, indicating the importance of these context-based issues for their writing and ultimately for their social status in the class:

> We found out in class that that's known as something about paying debts--there's a term for it (Steve, #1).
>
> My thought goes into it which means it could be wrong because I'm just a freshman in the course; it's a neat course; I'm not sure what's going on yet (Janey, #1).
>
> That's actually a paraphrase, a quote out of class discussion that we had ... saying exactly what Professor Lynch said in class about it can dip and it can go above just depending on how the interest rates are and whether it was a good time to do it or not (Bill, #1).
>
> Now we've discussed how we've done it once ... and because you've already done one paper on it, that I felt that you could abbreviate (Bill, #2).

In addition to referring to elements of the day-to-day classroom context, students also referred to experiences outside the class. In doing this, the students referred to events and

people that were not a part of the Management class. These references might have included a reference to another class, a friend, study sessions, or parents. These comments about context were like the ones that follow:

> I asked somebody what that meant (Steve, #1).
>
> I talked to somebody in a finance class (Bill, #1).
>
> What I wanted to do was, what really helped me with this paper was my OBM class, Organizational Behavior Management (Bill, #3).

Last, in talking about the context, students referred to the assignment, both the task and the subject matter as having implications for them and their writing. In doing this, the students referred to the case (either by its title or by citing or paraphrasing information from the case), used information from another source, or spoke directly about the assignment. Their reasons were like the following:

> Because they had a, Lloyd's had a tremendous debt (Kim, #1).
>
> If I'm trying to make up a schedule of when the jobs needed to be done and when the hours necessary for the fabricators and for the welders, for them to do the work, it couldn't all fit in (Paddy, #2).
>
> And if they just let them go on as they were, they probably would lose money; that's how I made that decision (Polly, #1).
>
> I wouldn't delete it because the industry had been down, management gave the reason why they went down ... (Polly, #2).

Over the course of the semester, the students referred to elements of the context more with each interview: 47% with the first; 60% with the second; and 64% with the third.

SO WHAT: THE REASONS FOR RECONSIDERING CONTEXT

Clearly, the writing that these students completed had social implications for them, both as individuals and as members of the class, influencing their views of themselves as writers and the social setting for which they wrote. Beyond the results reported in this presentation, that demonstrate writer-based, reader-based, text-based, and context-based implications for their writing, on the days that they had completed writing assignments for class, the students talked more in class, argued more about issues, expressed opinions that were solidly formed more often, and claimed more of the class time, demonstrating the ecological system that Cooper describes.

For our own classrooms and our own teacher training, what does this study suggest? Through their writing, students can gain a considerable amount of social power. It does influence the context for which it was constructed and produced, including the students' own social roles as integral parts of that context. They gain confidence in what they know about writing, feeling that the advice they give is sound. They gain confidence over their ability to address readers, even expert ones; they gain confidence over their texts and their contexts. In each area, as students gain power and confidence, the implications for their writing in the social situation of the class expands.

These are the optimistic inferences; obviously, some students do not gain power and confidence over these aspects of their writing. Ultimately, then, these students may not be perceived in the same manner that those who do come to understand the power that their writing generates in the classroom. This difference, very simply, then, is what the social

implications of writing is all about--prestige.

To help our students in their search for power and prestige in the classroom as demonstrated through their writing, as teachers, we must ask, "what is my view of writing and its teaching?" The answer to this question shapes our own classroom behavior as teachers of writing and creates the context in and for which our students write--from which these social implications of writer, reader, text, and context emerge. Last, and most important, we must ask ourselves repeatedly, the question that Marilyn Cooper asks: "What are we doing to students in the writing classroom, and why?"

Works Cited

Amidron and Flanders. *The Role of the Teacher in the Classroom: A Manual for Understanding and Improving Teacher Classroom Behavior.* 1971.

Applebee, Arthur N. Contexts for Learning to Write. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Co., 1984.

Bales, Robert F. *Interaction Process Analysis: A Method for the Study of Small Groups.* Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley Press, Inc. 1950.

Bazerman, Charles. "How Written Knowledge Does: Three Examples of Academic Discourse."*Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 11 (1981): 361-387.

---. "Physicists Reading Physics: Schema-laden Purposes and Purpose-laden Schema." *Written Communication* 1 (1985): 3-23.

Cazden, Courtney B. *Classroom Discourse: The Language of Teaching and Learning.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc. 1988.

Cooper, Marilyn M., and Michael Holzman. *Writing as Social Action.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1989.

Doheny-Farina, Stephen. "Writing in an Emerging Organization: An Ethnographic Study." *Written Communication* 3 (1986): 158-185.

Dyson, Anne Haas. "Learning To Write/Learning To Do School: Emergent Writers Interpretations of School Literary Tasks." *Research in the Teaching of English* 18 (1984): 233-264.

Fulwiler, Toby, and Young, Art, eds. *Language Connections: Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum.* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1982.

Hawisher, Gail E. and Cynthia L. Selfe. "The Rhetoric of Technology and the Electronic Writing Class." *College Composition and Communication* 42 (1991):55-65.

Herrington, Anne J. "Writing in Nonacademic Settings: A Study of the Contexts for Writing in Two College Chemical Engineering Courses." *Research in the Teaching of English* 19 (1985): 331-361.

Langer, Judith A., and Arthur N. Applebee. *How Writing Shapes Thinking: A Study of*

Teaching and Learning. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1987.

McCarthey, Lucille. "A Stranger in Strange Lands: A College Student Writing Across the Curriculum." *Research in the Teaching of English* 21 (1987): 233-266.

Myers, Greg. "The Social Construction of Two Biologists' Proposals." *Written Communication* 2 (1983): 29-45.

Odell, Lee. "Beyond the Text: Relations Between Writing and Social Context." In *Writing in Nonacademic Settings*. Eds. Lee Odell and Dixie Goswami. New York: The Guilford Press, 1986 (249-280).

Paradis, James, David Dobrin, and Richard Miller. "Writing at Exxon ITD: Notes on the Writing Environment of a Research and Development Organization." In *Writing in Nonacademic Settings*. Eds. Lee Odell and Dixie Goswami. New York: The Guilford Press, 1986 (281-304).

Peterson, Jane E. "Valuing Teaching: Assumptions, Problems, and Possibilities." College Composition and Communication 42 (1991): 25-35.

Smith, Margaret A. "Classroom Community: A Study of Writing, Social Context, and Classroom Discourse." Diss. Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 1988.

Smith, Maggy. "Writing as a Tool for Teaching: Promoting Classroom Discussion in an Introduction to Management Course." *Illinois Association for Personalized Learning Programs Newsletter* (September, 1989): 2-3.

Tinberg, Howard B. "'An Enlargement of Observation': More on Theory Building in theComposition Classroom." College Composition and Communication 42 (1991): 36-45.